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Cedarville Review Artist Spotlight: Zach Benson

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Please see the Editors' Foreword - [A Christian Response to Art and Literature: A Very Short Guide to Images and Texts](#)

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Artist Interview by Abigail Wisser

ZACH BENSON



TELL US ABOUT YOURSELF.

My wife, Britt, and I moved to Cedarville last summer to pursue the job opportunity of teaching sculpture and ceramics at the university. I graduated with my B.F.A. in sculpture from The University of Tennessee, Knoxville in 2011 and my M.F.A. in Studio Art from The University of Maryland in 2017. I am an active artist and have been blessed to have shown my work in Taiwan, Bulgaria, and throughout the United States. I also have made public commissions in Australia, California, New York, and Washington, D.C.. While God has blessed my creative work, hard times and periods of waiting have been part of my art too. One piece that showcases a hardship is *No Place Like Home: All Dressed Up With No Place To Go* (2013). In 2012, I applied to five M.F.A. graduate programs around the country. In the coming months, letter by letter came in and I had received five letters of rejection. I felt all dressed up with no place to go. This piece was done in response to the situation. I dressed up as if I was ready to go somewhere important and place myself in awkward, hard places for a period of time. With this particular performance, I was bound to the side of a barn for an extended period of time. Another piece in which I explore themes of my own identity is *Wrestling with My Roots* (2015). On July 9, 2015, South Carolina's governor signed a law that called for the removal of the Confederate battle flag from the State House grounds and sent it to a museum. I wanted to speak to this story even though it was an aggressive yet fragile one. I have seen and thought about this flag for much of my life. The material I use in my work allows me to navigate what I believe, what I am feeling. So, in the end, I can place the concept on the material and they stand together, they collaborate. How I decided to display the piece is the most important. I decided to roll it up, to make it feel intimate, small, and like it's hiding in a corner. Like it's saying "don't look at me, please don't see me, I'm ashamed." An artwork that explores my responsibility to my faith is *Torn Between One Way and Another* (2016). I CNC engraved the Ten Commandments using Ancient Hebrew onto reclaimed corkboard panels.

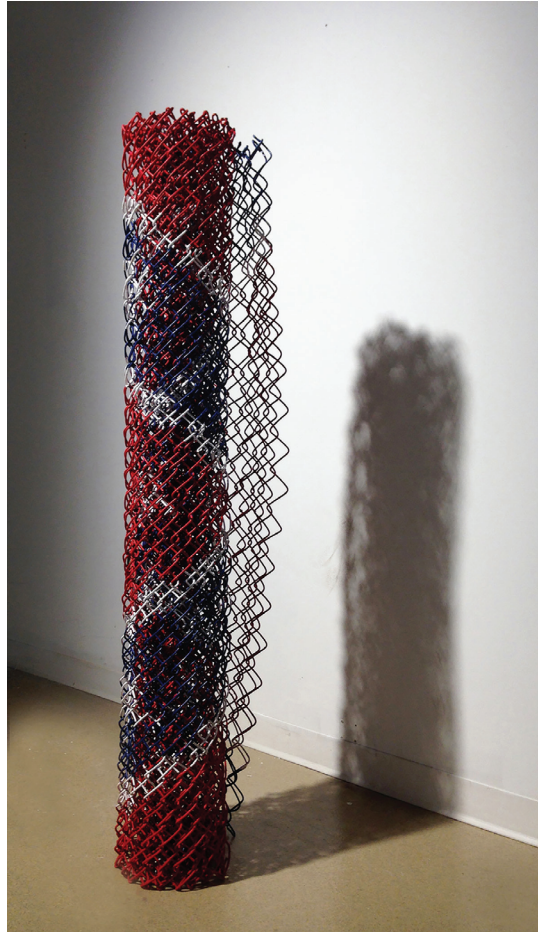
At the bottom of each panel is a contemporary item or phrase that correlates to that specific commandment. Some phrases might be offensive or might call the viewer to a higher standard. Personally, I want this piece to make me a better human being, to make me realize that all my actions are held to a standard.

HOW DOES YOUR FAITH INFORM YOUR ART?

Similarly to how my faith gives purpose and meaning to my life, my work serves a purpose. My studio is where I navigate current happenings, personal beliefs, and anthropological perspectives. I toil over aspects of life and society that are concerning, meaningful, or overwhelming, and allow my faith to navigate them. This process is reflected in pieces like *Wages of War* (2015), *God is Greater* (2016), *Torn Between One Way and Another* (2016), and *Their Cause is My Cause* (2017). I want the viewer to have the opportunity to grapple with these ideas as well. My work is the conduit through which I raise awareness and evoke empathy towards people and happenings. *Unavailing Regulation* (2016) is a piece done in response to Chinese national movement. In 2013, the Chinese government implemented a three-year campaign called “Three revise and one demolition” that claimed to hasten urbanization and “build a more beautiful Zhejiang.” Amid this campaign, over two thousand crosses have been removed from atop religions buildings and several churches have been razed. Some obserers suspect the campaign has the backing of the Chinese president, Xi Jinping, and could be a pilot project before a nationwide crackdown. As an artist, I want to be the one that speaks, and ultimately, I want my art to declare that I stand for something, that I stood up for someone, and that I allowed their voices to be heard. My piece *To Stand for Nothing and Stand Up For No One* (2015) speaks to this idea of giving a group a voice. In 2015, an anti-abortion organization released several videos that had been secretly recorded. They alleged that the videos provided evidence that abortion providers profited from the sale of donated tissue. (cont.)



NO PLACE LIKE HOME: ALL DRESSED UP WITH NO PLACE TO GO (2013)



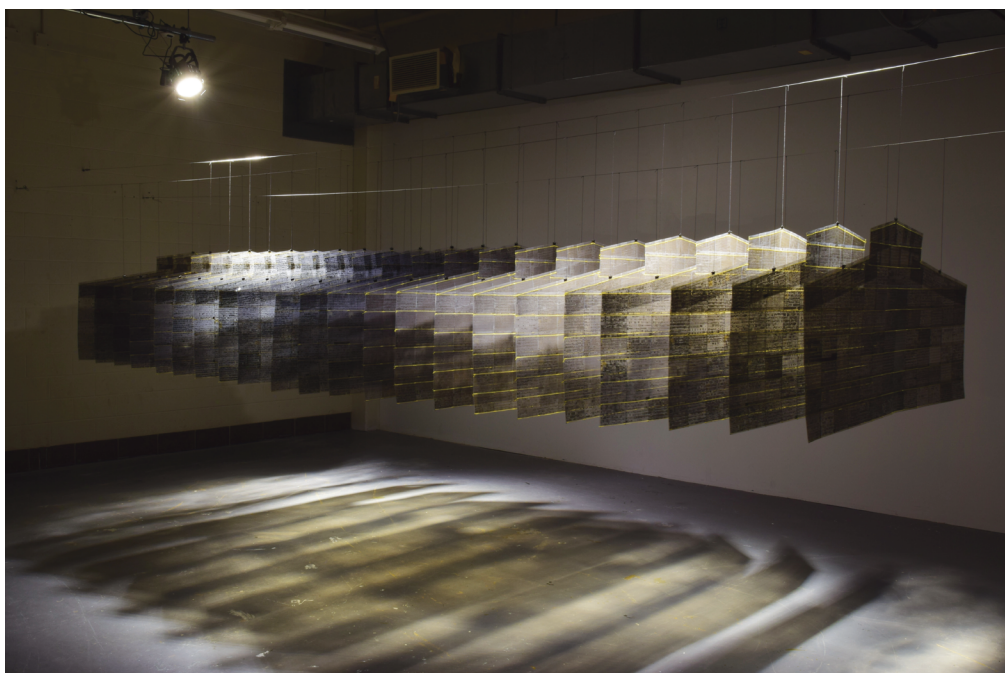
WRESTLING WITH MY ROOTS (2015)



TORN BETWEEN ONE WAY AND ANOTHER (2016)



UNAVAILING REGULATION (2016)



TO STAND FOR NOTHING AND STAND UP FOR NO ONE (2015)

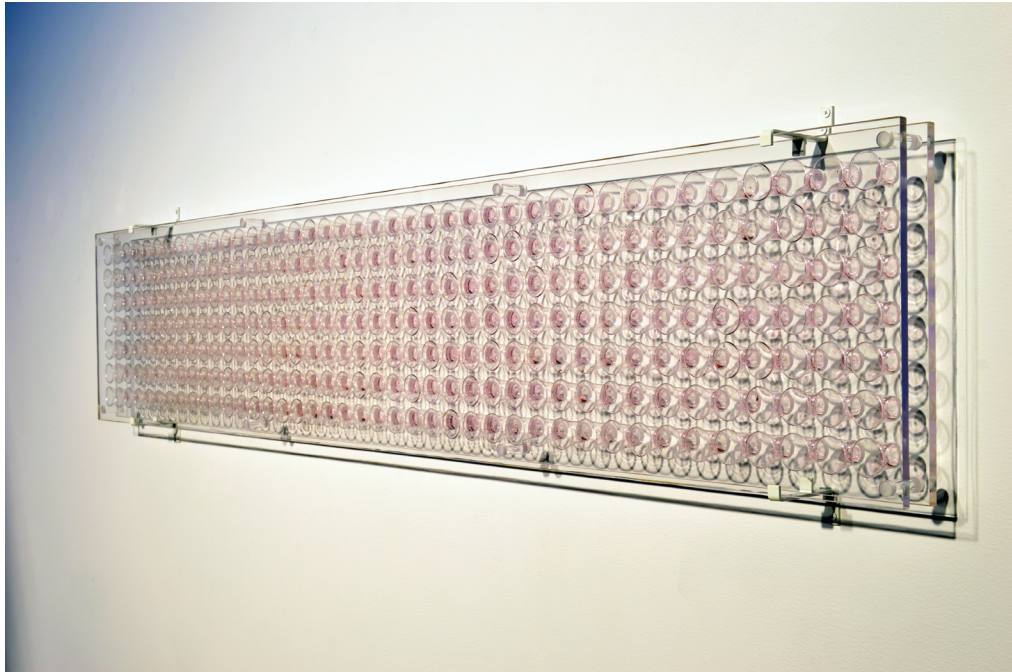
This piece speaks directly to that event. It consists of 2,332 microfiche films from the Marburger Index. This index was made prior to WWII and consisted of over 500,000 of Germany's greatest works and assets, many of which were destroyed during WWII. I sewed each one of these microfiche together into an exact replica of the bunk houses that housed Jews in the Auschwitz concentration camp and screen printed Planned Parenthood onto the microfiche. I'm not trying to convince the viewer that I have the right answers or that they should believe what I believe, I am just trying to become the best individual I can, and I am sorting it out in my studio, through my art.

IS THERE A PROCESS TO PICKING YOUR MEDIUM?

The majority of my work utilizes reclaimed materials. I take abandoned and discarded material and use it as pure medium, thereby redeeming it from apparent uselessness. My work thrives on this transformation which causes the viewer to value what they might otherwise view as mundane. *Looking at Life Through Rose-Colored Glasses* (2015) is a good example of this. It explains how the act of communion, the remembrance of what Christ did, allows one to see the world in a new light—a light of love and compassion.

WOULD YOU SAY YOU HAVE A PARTICULAR AESTHETIC?

The majority of my work utilizes the principles of design such as balance and repetition. When finding material to use in an artwork, I am most drawn to materials that I can get multiples of. I have seen that creating repetition with reclaimed material draws the viewer into the piece. This is incredibly helpful when dealing with harder societal issues such as abortion, the Syrian refugee crisis, U.S. politics, and more. For example, on Oct. 21, 2011, President Barack Obama announced that the last combat soldier would leave Iraq by the end of that



LOOKING AT LIFE THROUGH ROSE-COLORED GLASSES (2015)



WAGES OF WAR (2015)



GOD IS GREATER (2016)

year, (cont.) drawing the eight-year war to a close. “Our troops will definitely be home for the holidays,” Mr. Obama said at the White House. Less than three years later, he told a national television audience that he would send 475 military advisers back to Iraq to help in the battle against the Islamic State. By April 2016, more than 5,000 American troops were in Iraq. This is when I personally started to become aware of the wages of war, and I created *Wages of War* (2015). Before this, I was apathetic to war—disengaged. This piece consists of 4,497 images of the men and women who died while serving in the Iraq War from 2003-2011 and 535 Congressmen and women that were sitting and voted to go to this war. Another example of utilizing repetition is my work on *God is Greater* (2016). Saint Elijah’s Monastery (Dair Mar Elia) was the oldest Christian monastery in Iraq, founded in the late 6th century. It unfortunately was demolished by ISIS in 2014. I laser cut and practically burned this devastating satellite image of the site of the destroyed monastery onto fifteen Arabic Bibles. While the surface of the Bibles may be defaced, the substance remains. A more recent piece in which repetition is a prominent principle is *Their Cause is My Cause* (2017). On Feb. 15, 2015, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) released a video entitled, “A Message Signed With Blood to the Nation of the Cross,” which shows twenty-one Coptic Christians being beheaded on a sandy beach. This is just one of the 1,100 instances between 2003 and 2014 in which ISIS has brutally murdered Christians. The piece consists of seven spire-like ladder structures. In the midst of each of the spires are highly polished, wooden vessels. Each of these vessels carries delicate gold beads, symbolizing the passage of the 1100 martyrs from the harshness of this life into the grandeur of the next. These artworks address fraught issues, and I never want my work to come across as aggressive, but I hope using repetition and reclaimed materials allows the viewer to come to the work with intrigue and then navigate the concept once invested.



THEIR CAUSE IS MY CAUSE (2017)